



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

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Oyster production in the United States, which is now only half as large as it was 50 years ago, may have its downward trend reversed as the result of a new production program which has been submitted to state conservation officials and the oyster industry, Coordinator of Fisheries Harold L. Ickes announced today.

As a substitute for the present widespread system of free fishing, the plan contemplates a comprehensive system of state management of public oyster grounds, under which tongers and dredgers would be encouraged to practice oyster farming under state supervision. Details of the program were outlined to representatives of the industry by Dr. Paul S. Galtsoff, shellfish expert of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The continuing decline in oyster production on the Atlantic coast demands a new approach to the conservation problem, Coordinator Ickes declared. Although many of the measures now practiced by the state conservation agencies are good in themselves, they deal with isolated phases of oyster culture and fail to restore abundance because they neglect some essentials of successful oyster farming, he said.

In 1940, the most recent year for which complete figures are available the yield of oysters was about 89 million pounds, whereas 50 years ago the annual take was approximately 182 million pounds. The only eastern states in which production has increased are Rhode Island, South Carolina, Mississippi, and Louisiana.

In Georgia the oyster fishery has almost ceased to exist and the canneries which still operate in the State are entirely dependent on the supply of oysters from South Carolina. In the Chesapeake Bay, once a major oyster-producing area, the average production on the so-called "dredgers area" has been reduced from 54 bushels to 4 bushels or less per acre. Corresponding declines have occurred in most of the other formerly important oyster grounds of the Atlantic coast.

The poundage of oysters taken at the present time compared with earlier production, is illustrated by the following figures:

State	1890-92 Average	1939
	Pounds	Pounds
Massachusetts	381,106	269,800
Rhode Island	1,210,615	2,313,500
Connecticut	14,803,528	5,222,200
New York	19,582,965	6,272,700
New Jersey	15,924,303	5,096,100
Delaware	1,227,324	285,100
Maryland	70,843,326	20,342,300
Virginia	35,429,045	16,504,300
North Carolina	4,483,365	1,055,600
South Carolina	377,637	1,719,400
Georgia	1,532,345	234,400
Florida	2,220,363	1,065,500
Alabama	2,410,161	1,357,700
Mississippi	4,274,333	7,706,400
Louisiana	3,896,538	13,586,400
Texas	1,930,704	987,300
Total	180,532,663	84,018,700
Washington	999,100	8,526,900
Oregon	17,500	215,300
California	1,250,515	245,600
Grand Total	182,799,788	93,006,500

Citing the superior value of cultivated oysters as compared with those taken from natural reefs, Dr. Galtsoff reported that in 1940 more than 50 percent of the U. S. oysters (48.7 million pounds) came from private oyster farms as compared with 40.58 million pounds obtained from public reefs. However, the cultivated grounds amount to only about 13 percent of the total acreage of oyster bottoms in coastal waters, indicating the much higher yield, per acre, of oyster beds under cultivation. Public oyster beds in the Potomac River, Dr. Galtsoff told the representatives of the industry, yielded only 8.9 bushels of market oysters per acre in 1940, whereas cultivated oyster bottoms are capable of supporting from 500 to 1500 bushels per acre.

Although oyster farming on privately leased beds is a common practice in New England, in many states cultivation by private enterprise has been discouraged and the policy of free fishing on public reefs has been maintained.

"Oyster farming cannot be expected to progress," Dr. Galtsoff told the Shellfisheries Association, "if the bottom leased for this purpose to a private planter can be taken away from him on the testimony of two or three citizens testifying under oath that the ground in question used to be a natural oyster bed and produced oysters in quantities sufficient to provide profitable fishing. Disregard of property rights, poaching and stealing of oysters from private grounds, and leniency of courts dealing with these cases present in many States almost unsurmountable difficulties and impede the progress of the industry."

As a substitute for private oyster farming in states where there are legislative obstacles to its adoption, Dr. Galtsoff proposed that the states set aside areas in which a managed system of oyster farming will be carried on by the fishermen under direction. If even 500,000 acres of the public oyster rocks were brought under cultivation, the present yield of the public grounds could easily be doubled, he said.

The program outlined in detail to the Shellfisheries Association may be summed up as follows: The states should set aside separate areas for the production of seed and market oysters. (Good seed grounds are usually located near the mouths of rivers, where the water is less salty; while grounds suitable for maturing the oysters should be located farther offshore in deeper waters.) Seed grounds should be closed to fishing, except for the purpose of transplanting seed to growing grounds under regulation. After the seed has been matured on the growing grounds, these would be opened to fishermen for harvesting, and a new crop planted. A daily catch limit per boat or a restriction on the number of boats is recommended to promote orderly marketing. Grounds would be planted in rotation, to be ready for harvesting in 2, 3, and 4 years. The states should modify the details of the plan in accordance with differing natural conditions in the various coastal areas.

As proposed, the management system would apply to limited areas selected for intensive cultivation, and fishing on the public rocks in general would continue without restrictions.

To cover the cost of the states' farming operations, it is suggested that the fishermen pay a small assessment on each bushel taken from the cultivated grounds. Because of the higher yield of oysters under cultivation as compared with wild ones, fishermen could easily pay the assessment and still make a better living than under the present system, it was said.